

Newsweek

What Does Your City Say About You?

How new 'creative classes' are changing cities around the world.

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Is it just a cultural quirk that the New York women in "Sex and the City" are constantly kvetching about their love lives? Not according to "urban expert" Richard Florida, a business professor at the University of Toronto who studies how place affects lifestyle. In a new book out this week, "Who's Your City?," Florida says the world is far from flat, as New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman has argued. In fact, it's spiky, with money, innovation, and distinct personality types increasingly clustering in the world's major metropolises. Using data collected from satellites and census surveys, Florida describes how a "creative class" of people is changing the economic landscape by congregating in a shrinking set of cities located farther and wider than ever before. What's more, different types of these creative innovators are sticking with their own kind, molding each city's distinct demographics, job markets, and mating markets (or dating scenes). So despite the gadgets that now allow us to work from anywhere, says Florida, choosing where to live is more important than ever before. And as to all the frustrations expressed in "Sex & the City"? Well, just blame the 210,820 more single women than men living in the New York metropolitan area. NEWSWEEK's Katie Paul spoke with Florida to find out what our chosen cities say about us. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: The conventional wisdom is that, with technologies that allow us to work from anywhere, place is mattering less and less. Why is that not the case, and how are we getting it wrong?

FLORIDA: What I realized after studying this for a couple of decades is that no one's ever really given advice about how important the place you choose to live is. We now know that place is really important. It's part of a triangle of career, family, and the place you live. You know, people said the same thing about trade and technology making place less important when the telegraph was invented. But what we found in our research is that 40 million Americans move each year, and 15 million make really significant moves 50 to 100 miles out of the county they live in. That's a lot. And young people with high levels of education are the most likely to move. I call this the "brain migration" or the "means migration." In the past, mostly every city had the same profile of people: some college graduates, some graduate school graduates, some high school graduates, some high school dropouts. But now more and more highly educated people are moving to a smaller number of cities.

What does that mean for a given city?

In a place like San Francisco or Washington, D.C., about 50 percent of the total population in those regions is composed of people with a college degree or more. A place like Detroit might have 10 or 12 percent. And it's not just educational profile. What we're also seeing is a migration of people with a certain personality type. They want to have a new thrill, experience new things, and be in an interesting neighborhood. They're also the kind of people most likely to create new innovations, whether that's in music or film or high technology. Those people are seeking out a certain number of places, like greater New York, greater Washington, greater Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles. So from a technology point of view, there's a link between where people migrate and the psychology of those people, and where people innovate and create new ventures.

Cities have always drawn talented people. Is the increase you're talking about unprecedented?

We don't have enough historical information to say. But certainly over the past three decades that we can track this, yes, it looks like a pronounced trend. The world is getting smaller, so more places can play in the world economy, but the number of places that play is fewer. If you think about what happened to the car industry or the electronics industry over the past 20 years, there used to be a car company or three companies in every country, and then there was globalization in that industry. Now GM and Ford and Nissan and Toyota are battling it out, while many companies fell by the wayside. I think the same thing is happening with urban areas. Every country used to have a dozen or two dozen great cities. Now people are saying, "It's a global world. I'm mobile and I can go to New York, London or Beijing, or Bangalore." We're picking from a smaller set of cities, not just nationally but globally. So the biggest cities in the world are getting bigger and more expensive.

Sounds like this is all due to those very same technological innovations—teleconferencing, Internet access, etc.—that led people to the "world is flat" idea that you're refuting.

Technology makes the world smaller, but it also makes the world spikier. I'm not arguing against Thomas Friedman, but saying there's this additional force. I think he and others are aware of it, but I think people have glossed over it. Economic activity is not only becoming more concentrated but also more specialized. New York is great in fashion design and investment banking. San Francisco's great in software. L.A.'s great in entertainment technology. And Nashville is the epicenter of music production. So if you want to pursue a given career, it's not just that you can make it in any big city, because now there is a smaller number of big cities that will be the key places for you.

Since your background is in urban planning, how do you think cities' identities come to be?

One, those cities develop some edge in those fields. Take Silicon Valley and technology, for example. It had great universities, Stanford and the University of California up the road. Los Angeles was a great place to make films because it had a great climate. New York is a port city and center of commerce, so it's great at financial transactions and mercantile [trade]. There have always been [distinct] communities [with advantages] because they've had high levels of migration and been more open-minded, welcoming foreigners, misfits, bohemians, as well as gay and lesbian communities. So I think the reason someplace like Silicon Valley takes off in technology and not, say, Pittsburgh, where I lived, is that it's just a more open place.

How do the megaregions that you identify make place important to global economies?

Most people thought nation-states were the real competitors, or maybe the city and its suburbs. What we did in looking at this satellite data is figure out that the world is driven by 40 megaregions. These are places like the Boston-New York-Washington corridor, or the area that runs from Chicago to Pittsburgh, or the areas around Amsterdam, London, or Tokyo. We looked at satellite images of the world at night and determined that what makes a megaregion is what is lit up, because that's economic energy. These 40 megaregions account for about 20 percent of the world's population but produce about two-thirds of economic output and nine out of 10 of the world's innovations. They are the driving forces of the world economy. In the U.S., because we're a big, affluent country, we have 10 or 12 great megaregions. Most countries only have one, like China, with the Shanghai to Beijing corridor. So if the U.S. or Europe is a little spiky and uneven, then China, India, Russia and Brazil are completely spiky. If current trends persist, I think the U.S. and other advanced countries will come to look even more like the emerging economies. We're going to get even spikier, until such time as policymakers feel they need to address this.

And what are those implications for policymakers?

We're becoming so divided that these propulsive centers of our economy are generating fear, anxiety, and resentment. People say, "The cities are where the yuppies, trendoids, and gays live. We have to move back to family values." And our public policy actually punishes cities, as we transfer wealth from them to our hinterlands. It's in the culture wars, the Red and Blue states—the spiky centers are all bright blue, while the places being left behind are deep red. Barack Obama appeals to people in the spiky centers, Hillary Clinton appeals to the people in Ohio being left behind, and John McCain appeals to people who are outside and resentful of this kind of change. Sooner or later in our world economy, we're going to need leaders willing address this, but until then it's just going to get worse and worse, more and more concentrated. I think the real leaders with their heads screwed on right are the mayors. Regardless of party, a lot of mayors are focused on building thriving economies and increasing the quality of life in their towns.

So how should people use this data to determine what kind of decisions to make about where to move and what kinds of lifestyles to pursue?

In terms of my kids, my nieces and nephews, I would tell them first and foremost to think about where they're going to live. The first thing is not the job they're going to do, not the spouse they want. Then, as you think about those three things together, it'll become clear. If you're looking for a mate, just look at our singles map. You're just in a much better situation depending on your gender in different communities. But many of these people give little thought to the fact that where they live will have an effect on so many facets of their lives—from their ability to find a mate to their access to certain careers. You need to be smart about place to actually have the life that you want to have.

You're living in Canada these days. What does that say about your choice of place?

I've always been a huge fan of Toronto. And Toronto's leaders actually care about this and are trying to build a less spiky, more diverse and more inclusive economy. The University of Toronto put up money for an institute to study it, which I'm directing. And it's part a megaregion I dubbed "Torbuffchester," which is the fifth-largest in North America.

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